

Civil servants have rights — to deliver

A suggestion that the immunity granted to Members of Parliament be reviewed in the wake of criticism of civil servants has raised the hackles of elected representatives. Both Barisan Nasional Backbenchers' Club acting

chairman Datuk Raja Ahmad Zainuddin Raja Omar and DAP MP for Seputeh Teresa Kok agree that civil servants have the right of reply but only through their ministers or representatives in Parliament, writes V. VASUDEVAN.



RAJA AHMAD ZAINUDDIN

Q: Are BN MPs afraid of the possibility of losing their immunity? Their reaction to the former Chief Secretary's statement gives this impression.

A: No. The question of fear does not arise. This immunity is enjoyed worldwide. Certain parliaments may not have the concept of immunity. But we have had it since after Merdeka. Why bring up the issue now? We MPs must have the freedom or Parliament will be tame and we cannot discuss or raise issues.

Q: Are you angry with the Chief Secretary for suggesting a review of MPs' immunity in Parliament?

A: We are not angry. We don't want to quarrel with anybody. But if there is a delay over a certain project, is it wrong to seek answers? Why delay filling vacancies in government departments? Won't it affect the government machinery? District officers wear many hats but have no assistants. Doesn't this affect their efficiency?

These are legitimate questions that MPs want answers to. Is it wrong to raise these things in Parliament?

Q: What about the rights of civil servants?

A: Government servants have a responsibility — to deliver the goods. It is to implement what we have decided in Parliament. We are the policy-makers. We are not holding money, they do. They hold the allocations. Why are they afraid of us?

MPs are responsible for what they say in Parliament. We have to be able to speak out. The public will think that MPs are mere rubber stamps if we keep quiet. But we must be responsible about what we say.

Q: So, civil servants have nothing to worry about?

A: They just have to do their job and we will do ours. Don't interfere in our work.

We don't interfere in theirs, unless it involves projects which are delayed because of bureaucracy. Then, we speak out.

The Prime Minister wants the delivery system to be improved.

We want to make sure implementation is done well. For example, we want the 9th Malaysian Plan to be implemented smoothly.

Q: Are BN MPs sure of the facts and opinions they present in Parliament?

A: Yes. MPs are responsible for what they are saying. They do their homework and research.

We don't want people to say the MPs just come to Parliament to collect their al-

lowances and go back. We must be positive and proactive.

We don't simply talk. Right now we are looking at the Supplementary Supply Bill. We are looking at how the money will be spent and how government departments use the money.

Q: Some people say MPs are unfair. Civil servants who are criticised have no chance to reply.

A: You have to be fair to us. When we raise a matter in Parliament, the reply should be there. We have ministers, deputy ministers and parliamentary secretaries.

It is unfair to us when government servants reply outside the Parliament.

They have the channels for reply in Parliament and should use them.

If the minister or his representatives cannot reply because of a lack of time, they can always provide written answers.

There are so many ways to reply. Otherwise, the problem will go on and on.

This is what happened with the Customs Department. If a reply had been made in Parliament earlier, the matter would have ended there.

Q: Can civil servants lobby MPs on specific issues?

A: I don't like the word "lobby". Maybe they want to express a certain view, which they

cannot raise and hence come to meet us. But this is not restricted to government servants as anyone can come to see us. We are open to dialogue.

Q: What do you think is the people's impression of Parliament?

A: Whenever Parliament is not in session, people ask us when the session is going to be held. This shows that the people are following the goings-on in Parliament.

It gives us encouragement to do our work.

Q: Do you think live telecast of parliamentary proceedings will benefit the people?

A: I am in favour of it. The people will know what is happening in the chamber. Right now, there are only reports in the newspapers and limited television and radio coverage. There is nothing to be afraid of. If you talk about transparency, then you should allow live telecasts. The Prime Minister has given us (BN MPs) freedom to speak but it must come with a responsibility.

Of course, we will be responsible for what we say. Just because we have immunity doesn't mean we can simply say what we like. In Parliament, we have procedures which govern what we can and cannot say.

But live telecasts are expensive. Maybe for a start, we can telecast the daily "Question Hour" which runs for 90 minutes.

Let them talk, but with the permission of their bosses

Q: What do you make of the Chief Secretary's call to review the immunity enjoyed by MPs?

A: I find it very strange. He is talking about it after so many years of a Parliament's existence in Malaysia. If MPs can't bring up all issues about the misconduct or misbehaviour of civil servants, what can they talk about?

We even criticise ministers. Civil servants can always reply to the accusations through the minister in charge of their department.

But they should be allowed to talk to the media about such issues. If they think they have been misunderstood or misquoted on a specific issue, then they should be given the right of reply.

Q: What led to his statement?

A: Over the past three years (since Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took over as Prime Minister), civil servants have been taken to task by BN MPs, unlike in the past when they were protected by the Government.

That is why they are questioning the immunity enjoyed by MPs.

Q: What happens if urgent replies have to be made and ministers are not around?

A: In those situations, they should be given permission by their department heads to make immediate replies to clarify the wrong impression given to the public.

Q: Do you think MPs have been fair in criticising civil servants?

A: It depends on the situation. Sometimes, MPs wait until the point where we can't stand

the indifference to our complaints. That's when we raise issues in Parliament.

Parliament is our last resort as we usually try to settle complaints brought to us by the public at department level.

Q: How far should MPs go?

A: If we criticise them too much in public, then we burn our bridges with them and can't get their co-operation to settle future complaints. This is something we always worry about.

A few years ago, there was a City Hall head of department who refused to meet us or talk to us. I did not even know what he looked like. He refused to entertain us.

And so we brought up his name in the Dewan Rakyat. After that, he called the DAP MPs one by one and met us separately.

Of course, he scolded us but we responded in kind. After that, he instructed his officers to attend to our complaints.

This is a positive result from raising a complaint against a government department in Parliament.

Q: Will any good come out of MPs' criticism of civil servants in Parliament?

A: We need to be careful. Whenever we criticised a particular officer in the past, he responded positively to issues raised after that.

But we have to be fair to civil servants, too. They are entitled to a right of reply. Civil servants have a lot to say about politicians who level criticisms against them.

Q: How would you rate the civil service on a scale of one to 10?

A: They rate a five.